

By Whose Authority?

*the basis for sacramental forgiveness of sins
and indulgences in scripture and tradition*



- Albert P. Holden

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Life Has a Purpose

Without a purpose, life would become a mere existence, for it is purpose that makes life what it is. The people we admire, our country's heroes, for example, became worthy of our admiration because they saw always before them the ideals after which they strove. The saints of God, too, the heroes of the kingdom of Heaven, reached the heights of sanctity because they strove, with God's help, to attain the purpose for which they were created, the salvation of their soul. So, too, in a lesser degree, with everyone around us, if they are to be worthy of our admiration it is because they have a purpose to strive after. No one admires the person who is content to drift aimlessly through life. For them is experienced only a feeling of mild contempt.

If, then, it is expected of the ordinary man that he should have a purpose in life, should have some object after which he should strive, what then of the most perfect of mankind? What of the one who was not only the most perfect of the 'sons of men', but who was also true God? Can we not naturally expect that He, whose coming was prophesied for thousands of years, whose coming began a new era in the world's history, whose influence has molded the minds and thoughts of mankind for the last two thousand years, had some sublime purpose which caused Him to take upon Himself a human nature?

Christ's Purpose in Life

We are not left in doubt as to what that purpose was which the Son of God came to attain. The prophet Daniel foretold of Him, that He would come that "Sin may have an end" (Daniel 9:24); and the angel said to Joseph, "and thou shalt call his name Jesus. for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21); again at the commencement of His public ministry, John the Baptist seeing Him coming exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Then as the ministry was drawing to a close, He Himself said to His apostles, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also." (John 15:22-23)

Christ came as the Light of the world to enlighten darkness of mankind, and that darkness was sin.

How Christ Fulfilled that Purpose

The life of Christ, however, was not to be solely one of destruction. True, He came to destroy sin, but also He came to restore to health those souls which had been cured of that dread disease. A doctor could not count his work completed if he merely drove disease from the body. *Only* when the health is built up again is his work finished. During His lifetime, Christ referred to Himself as the Physician of Souls (Matthew 9:12). Yet, from an ordinary doctor is expected a definite way of curing ills. We do not expect him to work in any haphazard manner. So, too, with Christ, He had a definite way in which He worked the cure of souls, and this method can best be seen in the Gospel story of Mary Magdalen.

Christ, we are told, was at supper in the house of Simon the Pharisee, and at the end of the meal, as was the custom, the doors were thrown open that the poor might come in and

gather up the fragments that remained. Imagine the surprise of everyone when amongst them was seen Mary Magdalen, a woman notorious for her sins, an outcast with whom no ordinary person would associate. They stare at her in amazement. It is obvious that she, since she is rich, is not there for the fragments of food. She purses her way through the crowd until she comes to where Jesus sits. As she passes, the guests draw their garments round them, lest they should be contaminated by her touch. As she comes to the place where sits the 'Friend of sinners' she hesitates a moment, then with her eyes blinded by tears falls at His feet. The crowd look on with dignified disapproval. She, however, is oblivious to them. With her tears she washes the sacred Feet, drying them with her hair, and anointing them with ointment. The Pharisees are scandalized and think within themselves: Surely this man cannot be the prophet he claims to be, otherwise he would know that manner of woman this is. Why, no decent man will associate with her, and yet here is this man who claims to be the Messias allowing her to touch him.

Christ, being God, read their thoughts, turned to His host, and said, "Simon, I have somewhat to say to thee." And Simon, no doubt thinking that He would justify Himself, said, "Master, say it."

"A certain man," said Christ, "had two debtors; the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And whereas they had not wherewith to pay it, he forgave them both. Which, therefore, of the two loveth him most?"

Simon thought this an obvious question, and answering said, "I suppose that he to whom he forgave most." And Christ said, "Thou hast judged rightly."

Then, turning to the women, He said to Simon, "Dost thou see this woman? I entered into thy house, thou gavest me no water for My feet. But she with her tears hath washed My feet, and with her hair hath wiped them. Thou gavest Me no kiss; but since she came in hath no ceased to kiss My feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint; but she with ointment hath anointed My feet. Wherefore I say to thee: many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much. But to whom less is forgiven, he loveth less."

And He said to her, "Thy sins are forgiven thee...thy faith hath made thee whole. Go in peace."

In this incident can be seen portrayed the method with which Christ worked the cure of souls. First, since sin is hatred of God, he demanded a sincere sorrow for it. Mary Magdalen showed this by her tears. then, if the sorrow were really sincere, it must of its very nature contain the resolution of never willfully committing sin again. If this were not present then the expression of sorrow would be mere hypocrisy. Christ saw that her sorrow contained this resolution. In other instances, as for example, in the case of the man sick of the palsy, he states the need of this requisition in the form of a command: "Go, and sin no more."

There are two conditions, therefore, deemed necessary by Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Firstly, sorrow, and secondly, a firm purpose of amendment, that is, the resolution of never willfully committing sin again.

Christ Promises this Power to His Apostles

Christ knew that after three years of public ministry He would leave the earth. Being God He knew that so long as human nature existed, sin would abound, and the remedy which He had come on earth to establish was to exist as long

as the disease of sin existed. To carry on His work after He had left the earth He drew around Him a band of followers whom He called His Apostles. To the chief of these, Peter, He first of all promised the power to forgive sins when He said to him, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I give to thee the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth shall be bound also in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth shall be loosed also in Heaven." (Matthew 16:19)

Then later, He promises the same power of binding and loosing to the rest of the Apostles. "Amen, I say to you, whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in Heaven; and whatsoever you loose upon earth shall be loosed also in Heaven." (Matthew 18:18)

In the former text after assuring Saint Peter that he is the rock upon which the church shall be built, Christ continues, "And I will give thee the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven."

In this as in the other text Christ uses the future tense to show that He is *promising* this power.

Dealing with the promise to Saint Peter, Christ promises him the power of the keys. In the language of the Jews, as in our own tongue, to give anyone the keys of a place meant conferring on them supreme power and authority, to come and go, open and shut, just as they pleased. Therefore, in giving to Saint Peter "the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven," Christ gave him supreme power to govern His Church; to admit into it and to exclude from it, to impose and remit penalties. Such a power must of its nature include the

forgiveness of sins. Saint Peter is promised *the Keys* of the Kingdom of Heaven, not just one or two. Now, nothing excludes man from the Kingdom of Heaven as positively as does sin. If, then, Saint Peter lacked the power to forgive sins, he would not possess *all* the keys because he could not bind or loose, open or shut unconditionally, and God would not ratify all his official acts and consequently the words of Christ would be untrue. But the words of Christ, since He is God, must be true. The power of forgiving sins is promised, therefore, in the first place, to Saint Peter.

Later, Christ promises the power of 'binding and loosing' to the rest of the Apostles (Matthew 18:18). In order to give an added solemnity to His words, Christ prefixes them by the word 'Amen.' Only on very solemn occasions, when He had something of extra-special importance to say, does He use the word 'Amen.'

Christ Fulfills this Promise

The promise which Christ makes to His Apostles in Saint Matthew's gospel is fulfilled by Him when, after the Resurrection he miraculously appeared to them and said, "Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you." When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20:21-23)

In this most solemn way, Christ bestows on His Apostles the power to forgive sins. A power which He had previously promised to them. Henceforth they are to be His ambassadors in the world. From the context it is seen that Christ sent them to forgive sins in the same way in which He had been sent by His Heavenly Father, and not in a restricted sense.

This Power Implies Confession

Christ, during His lifetime, required two conditions for the forgiveness of sins. First, sorrow and secondly a firm purpose of amendment. Being God, He could read the hearts and thoughts of men, and consequently knew without being told what sins they had committed. With the Apostles, however, the case is different. They were not divine, but were ordinary men like ourselves. It was not in their power, except in special cases, to know the thoughts and read the hearts of men. Yet Christ had made them supreme judges in the spiritual world, with the power to give or withhold forgiveness. As in civil law a judge requires to have full knowledge of a case before passing judgment, so too in the case of sin, a transgression of the law of God. It was necessary for the Apostles to know the facts of each case before they could exercise their power as judge. What other way, since they could not read men's thoughts, is there by that the person wishing to have his sins forgiven should tell them to the Apostles?

Therefore, it follows that the means established by Christ for the forgiveness of sin entails three conditions.

- sorrow
- a firm purpose of amendment
- the telling (confessing) of sins to those to whom Christ said, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them."

This Power was Meant for All Time

The power of forgiving sins was not given to the Apostles alone, but to their lawful successors. Christ knew that the Apostles, being human, would one day die, but the Society

which He had founded was to exist until the end of time.
Observe the solemn words of Christ -

"As the Father hath sent me, so also do I send you."

He sent them clothed with His own power and He had commanded them to go into the whole world, to all nations, even to the consummation of the world. It was manifestly impossible for the Apostles themselves to go into the world and to every nation. Likewise, since they were human they could not exist until the consummation of the world, and yet Christ had promised to be with His Church to the end of time.

From the very nature and purpose of the Church it is plain that the power to forgive sins was not merely a personal prerogative of the Apostles but was granted to them in their official capacity and hence intended, like the Church, to be a permanent institution. The Church, with her divine mission, her apostolic succession, and her infallible teaching authority is destined to endure for all time. The power to forgive sins must be available and exercised as long as they are sinners and that means to the end of time. Any church not claiming to have this power could not possibly call itself the true Church of Christ.

As long, therefore, as the world shall last (even to the consummation of the world), shall the power to forgive sins, as instituted by Christ, exist and be exercised.

Where is that Power Today?

So far it has been seen that Christ Himself forgave sins, that He bestowed this power on the Apostles and their successors and that the means established for the forgiveness of sins entails three conditions on the part of the penitent -

- sorrow
- a firm purpose of amendment
- the Confession of sins to one to whom Christ said,
"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them."

It is an obvious fact that there is sin in the world today. If there is sin, then there is sin to be forgiven. Where then can be found in the world today the means laid down by Christ and fulfilling the three conditions which He deemed necessary for the forgiveness of sins?

The answer to this question is - 'In the Catholic Confessional.' A Catholic goes to confession because he realizes that sin is an offence against God, depriving him of His friendship. Realizing this, he is truly sorry. Thus he fulfills the first condition laid down by Christ. His sorrow being sincere, he makes the resolution never wilfully to commit sin again. Thus is fulfilled the second condition, viz., the firm purpose of amendment. Going to confession, he humbly tells his sins to the priest because he recognizes that to the priest has been transmitted that power of remission given by Christ to His Apostles when He said to them, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them." He knows that the priest cannot possibly forgive sins of his own powers, for since sin is an offense against god, He alone can forgive it; but the priest is exercising that power which has been bestowed on him by God Himself. He is acting as the ambassador of Christ.

Thus in the confessional, or to give it its correct title, *the Sacrament of Penance*, is to be found a means for the forgiveness of sins which is identical with that established by Christ.

Historical Proof for Confession

Even though some critics of the Catholic system will not go so far as to deny that Christ gave the power to forgive sins to His Apostles, yet they urge that the *confessing* of sins is a modern invention of the Church. A glance at the writings of the Fathers of the early Church is sufficient to disprove this objection, and show that this practice has been the custom from the time of the Apostles.

Saint Cyprian (died in 258): I entreat you, brethren, that each one should confess his own sins while he who has sinned is still in the flesh, while his confession may be received, while his satisfaction and the absolution given by the priest are still pleasing to the Lord. (De lapsis 28-29)

Origen (died 254): The layman who falls into sin cannot by himself wash away his own fault; he must have recourse to the Levite; he needs the priest nay at times he applies to one even greater than they; he needs even the Pontiff's help that he may obtain the remission of his sins. (In numeros x. 1.)

Saint Pacian (died 390): admonishes sinners "to cease to hide their wounded conscience" and to follow the example of "the sick who do not fear the Physician though he cut and burn the secret parts of the body"; he goes on to say, "'God alone' you say 'can remit sins.' Quite correct. But what he does through His priest, is done by His power." (Libellus ad pen. 6-8)

Saint Ambrose (died 397): Sins are forgiven through the Holy Ghost. Certainly, but men lend him their ministry...they forgive sins, not in their own name, but in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. (De Spiritu Sancto III, 137)

These history quotations have been confined to the early centuries because in later years they are more abundant, and the object of the ones quoted is achieved when it is shown that auricular confession was the practice of the infant Church, a practice obviously derived from the Apostles themselves.

It is worthy of note that until the time of the so-called reformation, no one ever questioned the right of the Church to forgive sins. The Montanists in the second century were declared heretics because they asserted that there were certain sins which the Church could not forgive, whilst the Carthari and Waldensians erred with regard to who could exercise the power of forgiveness. None of them contested the power of forgiving sins in the Church. Even in Luther's "Little Catechism" and the Apologia of the Augsburg Confession, Penance is mentioned as the third sacrament.

Again, all the Eastern sects have confession, i.e., the Sacrament of Penance, even though they separated from the Church at an early period in her history. This proves that at the time of their separation they practiced the Sacrament of Penance.

For one moment, suppose that Confession had not been the practice of the Catholic Church, and then the Pope or one of the councils had decided to impose on the faithful the obligation of confessing their sins. Obviously such a burden, distasteful to human nature, could not have been imposed without creating a vast upheaval. There would have been schisms and revolts everywhere, and the date of its institution would have stood out as definitely as that of any great event in history. But there is no trace in the history of the Church of any such happening. The absence of all protests during the centuries prior to the reformation is an

evidence proof that Confession was regarded as a sacred duty imposed by none other than Christ Himself.

The Value of Confession

A glance at the alarming growth in the number of suicides in Europe since the reformation points to the salutary effects of Confession. It is an established fact that suicide has been much more common in non-Catholic than in Catholic communities. A writer in the Encyclopedia Britannica, in an article on 'Suicide' bears out this statement. In England and Wales during the years 1861 to 1906 the average annual number of suicides has gone on steadily increasing from 65 to 100 for every million inhabitants.

Are there not good grounds to assert that this terrible increase in self-destruction is due to the far-reaching effect of the abolition of the Catholic Confessional? Nothing inclines a soul more to despair and eventually to self-destruction than does worry and sin. The Catholic, burdened maybe under all the troubles, worries and sins in the world, can go to confession and tell them to the priest. Perhaps he has never seen the priest before, perhaps he will never see him again. There is no danger of anything he has told the priest becoming known. He knows that the priest is bound under the 'Seal of Confession' never to reveal anything that has been told to him during the exercise of that divine office.

Above all, the Catholic knows that in confessing to the priest he is laying his troubles and sins before one who is not only a Judge but also a Physician. One who will not only, in the name of Christ, grant him forgiveness of his sins, but at the same time show him the particular remedy he needs.

Before the reformation suicides were rare when compared with their enormity today, and it was not until the time of

the reformation that confession was abolished.

Hope has always been sanity, whereas despair is madness and folly. Christ came into the world to bring a message of hope. His teachings were the longed for 'Good Tidings,' and the Sacrament of Penance, as He instituted it, is a sacrament of Hope. It is a breakwater which reduces to a minimum the sea of despair which is engulfing the world today.

Definition of an Indulgence

Closely allied to the Sacrament of Penance is the Doctrine of Indulgences, and this is without doubt the most maligned doctrine of the Catholic Church. Either through deliberate misunderstanding or through ignorance, people outside the Church have a completely wrong idea of this teaching. Therefore, it is advisable to commence this short explanation with a clear definition of what exactly an Indulgence consists.

From the beginning we are handicapped by the very word *indulgence*; a person is called *indulgent* if he closes his eyes to another person's faults. It is hardly surprising, then, that when a person is told that the Church grants Indulgences, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that in some inexplicable way the Church is 'winking' at her children's non-observance of the ten commandments, and giving them permission to commit sin for a period varying in length from forty days to seven years.

An indulgence is not a pardon of sin; still less is it a permission to commit sin. What then is it? The penny catechism gives us the clearest answer -

"An indulgence is a remission, granted by the Church, of the temporal punishment which often remains due to sin after

the guilt has been forgiven."

An indulgence, therefore, is a pardon, not of the guilt of sin, but of the temporal (not eternal) punishment incurred by sin. This remission, it must be understood, refers only to the *temporal* punishment due to sin. Though sanctifying grace be restored to the soul by the Sacrament of Penance, the sinner, unless his sorrow be perfect, still remains answerable for a large debt of temporal punishment. This debt is sometimes fully discharged by the penance imposed in confession, but there is, as a rule, a large residue which must be removed either in this life or in Purgatory.

When, therefore, the Church grants an indulgence, she is in no sense giving her children permission to commit sins for any allotted span of time.

Where does the Church get Her Merits for Indulgences

The Church draws her merits for "blotting out" the temporal punishment due to sin from a treasury of which her Divine Founder constituted her the dispenser, and out of which she grants to each individual as much merit as is needed to satisfy the justice of God. This treasury consists of the super-abundant merits of Christ and His Saints. A clearer idea of the nature of this treasury is obtained if it is realized that any good work done for God has a three-fold value - it is *meritorious*, *impretratory*, and *satisfactory*.

Meritorious: If a person declines to commit sin, because God has so commanded, or says his prayers because God has so ordained, he merits from God a reward. This reward is a man's own, he can never hand it on to another, but it is stored up for him in heaven and will avail him at the end of his life as an offset to his demerits.

Impetratory: Good works have also the power to win favors from God, either for ourselves or for others. Thus, a person may pray or do penance in order to obtain from God a favor or grace of which he or another stands in need.

Satisfactory: The true meaning of the word 'satisfaction' appears in the expression 'to satisfy a debt or a debtor'. when we talk of our acts as 'satisfactory' we refer to their power of making reparation for wrong doing, and it is clear that a person who, by sin, has incurred a debt of punishment can by subsequent acts pay off or satisfy this debt. No one would punish equally a person who had offended him, and afterwards never performed any acts of reparation, and other offender who had by repeated acts shown his sincere sorrow. If this is natural to us, it must be still more so with God who is Perfection of Generosity. It is in this sense the acts proceeding from the love of God, whom we have offended, have the power to 'satisfy' the punishment due to sin.

The deeds wrought by Christ whilst on earth were of infinite value, since they were performed by an infinite God in a human form. Christ's merits therefore constitute an infinite, inexhaustible source of satisfactions to be applied to His brethren whom He redeemed. It is on this treasury that the Church relies when she grant an indulgence. To these merits she adds those of the Saints.

Having considered these facts we are in a better position to arrive at a clearer concept of what exactly an Indulgence is. It is a remission of the temporal punishment, which a penitent, whose sins are forgiven, has yet to undergo, ether here or in Purgatory; this remission is granted by the Church, through the power of the keys, from the treasury of the super-abundant merits of Christ and His Saints.

The Power of the Church to Grant Indulgences

The power to grant indulgences rests on the universal character of the power of the Keys. this power includes the faculty of loosing as well as that of binding. Christ said to Saint Peter, and in his person to his successors,

"I will give to thee the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)

To all the Apostles together, and to their successors, the Bishops of the Catholic Church, He said,

"Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)

Thus Christ conferred upon Saint Peter and the Apostles, that is, on the Pope and the Bishops, the power of loosing as well as the power of binding, the power of remitting as well as of imposing penalties. He, therefore, gave to His Apostles and their successors the power to loose all spiritual bonds, to release the faithful of their spiritual debts, the debt of temporal as well as of eternal punishment. This power is somewhat similar to that possessed by the state which can remit the penalty of death, substitute a lighter punishment for a heavier one, or grant a complete pardon.

To this may be added another consideration. The pardoning of eternal punishment of sin through the Sacrament of Penance is proof of a far greater power than the remission of temporal punishment effected by indulgences. The Church has the greater power, that is, of forgiving sins, so there is no reason for denying her the smaller power. Christ gave the

power of loosing unconditionally to His Church, and without limit; therefore, she can use it outside of, as well as in, the Sacrament of Penance. This is illustrated by Saint Paul's attitude to the incestuous Corinthian. Though he delivered him "up to Satan," i.e., excommunicated him, he received him back and remitted his punishment when he showed sorrow. The Apostle justifies this step,

"And to whom you have pardoned anything, I forgive also; for what I also have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, for your sakes have I forgiving it in the person of Christ." (2nd Corinthians 11:10)

The Church, even in her infancy, acted as though she were authorized by God to remit the temporal punishment due to sin. During the time when Canonical penances were inflicted, she frequently lightened, abbreviated or entirely remitted them. She could not have done so unless she believed that her acts were ratified before God. Proof of this can be found in the writings of Tertullian and Saint Cyprian; the Council of Ancrya (314) expressly vindicates this power of granting indulgences.

Kind of Indulgences

Indulgences may be divided up into various classes, the chief of which, and the most important, is the distinction between *plenary* and *partial* indulgences.

A *plenary* indulgence is the remission of the whole of the debt of temporal punishment due to sin, after its guilt has been forgiven.

A *partial* indulgence is the remission of part of the temporal punishment due to sin. These indulgences are measured by the penitential Canons of the early Church, being granted

for forty days, seven years, etc. Thus an indulgence of forty days or seven years means a remission of a much of the temporal punishment as would have been discharged in ancient times by a penance lasting for forty days or seven years.

Indulgences may be applied to the souls in Purgatory, yet it is only in a wider sense that the power of the Keys apply to these souls. The Church offers to God from the treasury of merits at her command an equivalent satisfaction with the request to remit any remaining punishment to the extent of the indulgence offered by her. The souls do not receive these indulgences directly, but indirectly, through the intercession of the living. As the faithful on earth can aid the poor souls in a general way by their prayers, so they can help them in a particular way by means of indulgences through their intercession.

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